

# TALMUD TORAH 5:4

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

**4.** Any student who isn't ready for \*hora'ah\* and instructs - is a \*rasha\* (evil person), a \*shoteh\* (imbecile) and arrogant. Regarding such a person, it says: "She has cast down many corpses" (Mishlei [Proverbs] 7:26). Similarly, a sage who is ready for \*hora'ah\* and does not instruct - restrains the [spread of] Torah and places stumbling blocks before the blind. Regarding such a person, it says: "How many are those she slew" (ibid.). These young students, who have not studied sufficient Torah, seek to gain prestige in the eyes of the commoners and the people of their city, they jump to sit at the head of all questions of law and Halakhic judgments in Israel. They increase dispute, they destroy the world, extinguish the light of Torah and wreak havoc in the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. Regarding them, Shelomo said in his wisdom, "Take for us foxes, little foxes that spoil the vineyards..." (Shir haShirim [Song of Songs] 2:15).

**-Q1:** Why use the same verse to condemn those who aren't ready for instruction and instruct - and those who are ready and don't?

**JB:** I think R does this occasionally (I seem to recall twice since we've been learning); by using 2 parts of the same verse (or sometimes the same chapter), it gives the statement more of an internally consistent feel. Even though the pasuk was not meant to imply this, it is a clever way of making us feel like it is. Not that I mean to imply that R is making something up, God forbid, but that he skillfully juxtaposes phrases from the same verse to show us that there are two kinds of people, as if drawn from a list.

**YE:** One further point - this homiletic lesson, sourced in BT Sota 22a, accomplishes a cognitive inclusio (to which Jay alluded) - there are two ways to "kill" - and they are of somewhat equal consequence. A teacher who is not ready and instructs; and a teacher who is ready and shies away from instruction. We would usually not associate the same severity to one who shies away, ascribing positive character traits (humility etc.). The equation is strengthened by using two parts of the same verse.

**Q2:** Why "evil, imbecile AND arrogant"?

**JB:** An evil person does bad things and he knows it. An imbecile does bad things and he doesn't know it. An arrogant person is a combination: does things either bad or good, by virtue of the fact that his priorities are misdirected. Someone who "jumps the gun" is doing something that combines all three.

**YE:** The "arrogant" and "evil" components speak for themselves. Regarding the "imbecile", Rabbi Yoel Sperka (my high-school Rebbe) shared an insight which is relevant and worth passing on. R, in Hilkhhot Melakhim [Laws of Kings and their Wars] 8:11, discusses the issue of the seven Noahide laws. R codifies that any non-Jew who observes these seven laws merits the World to Come (\*Olam haBa\*) and is considered a "Righteous Gentile". R adds a caveat: that this merit only accrues to him if he accepted these laws because of their Sinaitic/Torahic origin. "However", R concludes, "if he observed them due to his own reasoning, he is not a \*Ger Toshav\* (Resident Alien), not a Righteous Gentile, \*velo meHakhameihem\* (nor one of their sages)." R. Sperka asked as follows: If this gentile came to the same conclusions as the Torah, based on his own reasoning, isn't this a brilliant person? Why does R add that he is also not one of their sages? R. Sperka answered, based on the verse (Tehillim [Psalms] 111:10) "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God" - that someone who thinks that he can take things into his own hands and define a code of law and morals for himself, without connection and association with the Divine, is a fool. Similarly, in our case, one who undertakes the responsibility of Torah instruction without being properly prepared/worthy is a fool in the global sense. (note: in variant manuscripts of R, the last two words are \*ela meHakhameihem\* (rather, he is one of their sages) - a differences of one letter (\*vav\*/alef\*) - which renders this explanation moot...but it is certainly insightful)

**Q3:** R's language is strong and reminiscent of TT 3:10 - where his diatribe against those who study, don't work and rely on the public funds even utilizes a similar phrase - "extinguishes the light...". Why the strong language here? Is there any relationship between this and the Halakha in TT 3:10?

Great question. There is a clear similarity, related, perhaps to what I mentioned above. Both people are using Torah FOR THE WRONG REASONS. The whole notion of Torah Lishma, Torah for its own sake, implies that we should learn Torah because it is God's word, and he commanded us to walk in his ways and this is the instruction book, so to speak. But in 3:10, the person has made a living off of it, and here, he has used it as a personal status symbol. This is the lowest possible level of Torah learning, and a kind of abuse. Interestingly, you'll notice that despite all the terrible words, he never says it's FORBIDDEN. There is technically no violation of Torah law here, and it's all in the question of degree. If you're 95% ready or if you're not sure if you are, is it better to fear violating Torah law than to "risk" helping others with good intent? As a result, R's style is simply to impress upon us the seriousness of it.

**Q4:** How does the teacher who is ready for \*hora'ah\* and doesn't instruct "place stumbling blocks"?

**JB:** Because there are simply going to be people who will sin. When a person is qualified to advise and does not, he is actually, it seems, capable of passively tripping someone up by not helping them see the light. It is certainly a strong statement, and I'm not sure there is precedent for it. Could R have been using it to make a point as opposed to implying that he actually violates a biblical commandment of not placing a stumbling block?

(Additional questions)

**LN** ([Lori Nizel](#))

**Q5:** Who decides whether a student is ready for \*hora'ah\* ? Presumably the teacher would, but what of a case in which the student had never asked the teacher before the teacher died?

**YE:** That is the exact purpose of modern-day \*Semikha\* - ordination. Since "real" \*Semikha\* - passing on the mantle of leadership in a chain going directly back to Moshe at Sinai - has been interrupted, the only Halakhic impact of \*Semikha\* is \*Heter Hora'ah\* - literally, "Permission to instruct". Permission is given for specific areas of instruction (see the first chapter of BT Sanhedrin (5a) and MT Sanhedrin 4:8).

**LN:** - **Q6:** If a student is not ready for \*hora'ah\*, what type of instruction is forbidden--sitting and teaching only, or also the kind of instruction just mentioned, in order to prevent a \*Hillul Hashem\*?

**YE:** It would seem (from our text) that "sitting and instructing" - or even responding to a Halakhic inquiry that demands \*hora'ah\* (most likely, this involves approaching a "new" situation, one not dealt with in "canonized" Halakhic texts - on the other hand, if someone asks you something and you have learned this particular issue and can cite the Shulhan Arukh, Mishnah Berurah etc. and provide an answer - that would not seem to be an issue of \*hora'ah\*).

On the other hand, if you see someone doing something which you are sure is a violation of Halakha, AND you know that they will listen to you if you try to intervene AND you know that you can intervene in the appropriate way - then intervention is not limited to people with \*Semikha\*.

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